BLACKOUT at HALF DIAMOND M

BY Alan A. Fraser.

"Gad, sir," cried the Colonel, "it is your duty to co-operate."

The horizontal rays of the autumn sun, about to slip behind the cold, grey pillars of the Selkirks, streamed through the west windows of the ranch house living room as Colonel Cyprian Buck, Retired, late of the British Army in India, sat arguing none too amiably with his genial host, Angus MacGregor, sole owner of the Half Diamond M. They had been discussing Blackouts.

"But, Colonel!" expostulated the grizzled rancher, as he tapped his pipe, "do you realize we're jest about two hundred and fifty odd miles southwest of Calgary? When that radio feller mentioned farmers he wasn't meaning us Windermere Valley folk."

"Nevertheless," affirmed the Colonel, "I insist we do something about it. Now, in my capacity as Air Raid Warden of the district ...."

And the Colonel was off again with vivid descriptions of his A.R.P. activities in the city of Victoria.

His fellow guest at the ranch, Mrs. Fanny Bliven, sighed. She was exceedingly bored with the Colonel's stories and annoyed at him for so monopolizing the conversation.

Finally the old rancher lost patience.

"Look here, Colonel Buck," he said, "I've listened to you until I'm plumb tuckered out. This isn't Calgary and it's a heck of a long way from being Victoria. I'm not going to do anything about it.

The Colonel flushed.

"Angus MacGregor," his voice was almost plaintive, "if I did not consider you my esteemed friend, I should feel myself insulted. You are just like all the other ostriches in this country, sticking your head in a sandbank and saying over and over to yourself, 'It can't happen to me, it can't happen to me.' It's that attitude that led to the fall of Poland, the fall of the Low Countries, the fall of France, the fall of ----"

"Your arches," interrupted Mrs. Bliven, "you've talked yourself flat-footed, Colonel. Can't you see your host has reached the end of his patience? Let's just change the subject. Are you coming to Victoria this winter, Kitty?"

Kitty MacGregor, energetically knitting, had been silent during the long conversation.

"We had thought we would, dearie," she replied, " but after Colonel Buck's vivid description of life in your Dim-outs, I've been thinking we'd be much happier in the Valley. I wouldn't enjoy the Colonel routing me out of a warm bed and rushing me into the basement in my kimono."

"Nonsense, my dear," said the Colonel, emphatically, "you'd love it. Gives one such a sense of --ah-- being in the thick of things, you know."

"Yes," Angus drawled, " Kitty's right. We're too old to go traipsing about Miss Coles' damp and chilly basement in the middle of the night. We'll stay put and be comfortable.

"Sensible man!" breathed Mrs. Bliven.

It had been the custom of the MacGregors, in their latter years, to spend two or three months of the winter in Victoria. There they had always stayed at Miss Coles charming guest house, 'The Sea Wall', and it was there they had made the acquaintance of their present guests. They had been very attracted to the bristling, blustery, old Army man, and to the sparring partner of his verbal duels, Fanny Bliven, a wealthy American widow. Eventually it had become custom for the Colonel and Mrs. Bliven to spend two or three weeks with the MacGregors at the Half Diamond M, before the autumnal exodus for the West Coast.

Before the arrival of their guests, Kitty and Angus had found much quiet amusement in hazarding a guess as to which of his many hobbies the Colonel would be riding this year. The previous winter he had spent in writing innumerable letters to the Daily Press on the subject of Women in the Armed Forces and made not a few enemies, particularly among the weaker sex. The previous year he had unsuccessfully attacked a Temperance Society. But nothing in the past had equalled the energy and vocal outpouring that he had lavished on the subject of A.R.P. since his arrival at the Half Diamond M. Life for the Colonel was a mad whirl of drills, meetings and the writing of pamphlets.

The cadaverous Colonel had covered the subject many times, repeating his tales over and over again until everyone was heartily sick of them and was just beginning, as Mrs. Bliven said, to take time out to draw a good size breath, when the unfortunate radio announcer from a Calgary station, telling at the end of the news of a trial Blackout in that city and the surrounding environs in which farmers were asked to co-operate, had wound him up again like a grandfather clock.

Despite the ennui on every face, his host's glowering glances, and Mrs. Bliven's furious kicks on his bony shins, the Colonel was still in fine fettle during the evening meal and con-

tinued to plead, order and threaten his host to do something.

At the very least," he remarked, "you could get some horse blankets from the barn and cover up the living room windows."

"And smell up my tidy house," cried Kitty, "I should say not! I like horses, but not that intimately."

"Why don't we just go to bed? That will solve all our problems."

Too late Fanny Bliven realized she had given the Colonel a golden opportunity and he was not slow in realizing it.

"That's just the type of co-operation that leads to disaster when a genuine raid is on. Don't you people know ...." And so on, until Kitty gave the signal for bed, shortly after nine.

A brief time after the house became quiet the silence was disturbed by the creaking of one of the doors. The building was a one-storied, L-shaped affair, the bedrooms being situated in the short wing, a long corridor running along the south wall connected with the main wing. It was down this same corridor that a mysterious shadow crept, reached the unlocked door, lifted the latch and stole out into the night. The shadow was dark against the moonlight as it crept hurriedly towards the tool-shed and disappeared within. Out again in a few moments but this time its progress was slower as if it were dragging a weight. The ghostly figure then made a slow circuit of the house, pausing every now and then to stretch up, as though in some wierd apotheosis to the moon. After encircling the house in this fashion, the phantom returned to the tool-shed, then scurried across the yard and disappeared within the house. Seconds later the discerning ear could barely distinguish the creak of bedsprings, as though another weary being sought repose.

The autumn sun sprung from its cradle deep in the crenulated peaks of the Rockies, and mounted higher and higher in the sky. The shadows of night slunk faster and faster down the forested slopes of the Selkirks and soon the Windermere Valley was bathed in brilliant sunshine. The ranch house was ablaze with morning light but no human figure emerged to greet the day.

Finally, one of the ranch hands, curious at the unusual absence of his employer, walked towards the back door. He looked at the house a glint of horror started in his eye. He broke into a run, crashed through the back door and, running down the corridor, he woke Angus MacGregor with furious poundings on the bedroom door.

A crusty voice, heavy with sleep, called out.

"Who in tarnation's that?"

"It's me, Jed!"

"Well, what in blazes are you waking me fer in the middle of the night? Cow calvin'?"

"No, sir, it ain't night. It's ten o'clock in the morning."

A bellow came through the door and in a moment the old man opened it. He stoodthere, his eyes bleary with sleep.

"What are you diddlin' about ---are you drunk? Look out that window and tell me again it's ten o'clock in the mornin'. Why, it's black as pitch out."

"I think it is pitch, Mr. MacGregor. All the windows is that way."

"What are you babbling about, you miserable coyote. Do you think I'm blind?"

"Listen to me, Mr. MacGregor! Somebody's been and painted all your windows over with that roofing tar we had in the tool-shed."

"What?"

Unbelief was mirrored in the rancher's eyes. Then, as the light of complete comprehension filtered through his clearing head, Angus MacGregor trumpeted a roar that would have turned his prize bull green with envy.

"Colonel!"

There was no reply. No sound save the stifled giggles of the two women, rolling convulsively on their respective beds in the grip of helpless mirth.

"Colonel Buck, you lily-livered pole cat, come out of that bedroom and fight like a man!"

The Colonel never stirred. He was sleeping the sleep of the just.